

Evaluation of the Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN)

Evaluation Report – Executive Summary

Mokoro Limited

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The evaluation team is solely responsible for the opinions expressed in this report and for any errors that remain.

Acronyms and abbreviations

CMAM	Community-based management of acute malnutrition
en-net	ENN online forum
EQ	Evaluation Question
FEX	Field Exchange
IFE	Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NEX	Nutrition Exchange
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OFDA	Office for US Foreign Disaster Assistance
SO	Strategic Objective
TD	Technical Director

Executive Summary

Introduction

Background

S1. This is the report of an independent evaluation of the Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN), undertaken by a team from Mokoro Limited.

S2. The Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN), was set up in 1996 to improve practice and record important lessons experienced in the emergency food and nutrition sectors. ENN produced a publication, Field Exchange (FEX), to act as a forum that would help to fill this gap in knowledge sharing. From its early years ENN was also engaged in supporting interagency collaboration to develop guidance and training for infant feeding in emergencies, a strand of work that still continues. It has since taken up other related themes, and it now also publishes Nutrition Exchange (NEX) and runs an on-line forum (en-net) to support practitioners in emergency nutrition. ENN undertakes reviews and research linked to current nutrition themes, and facilitates various meetings and collaborations.

S3. Originally established in Dublin, ENN moved to the UK where it was registered as a charitable company in 2006. All formal authority within ENN resides with the six Trustees who form its board of directors – four non-executive directors and two executive directors. In practice, ENN has four designated technical directors who make key decisions, both operationally, and on ENN's overall strategy. There has been continuity in ENN's personnel; one of ENN's executive directors is a founder, and the other has worked with ENN since 2001. ENN has operated with a light management structure, supported by a small office in Oxford to meet basic administrative needs. ENN has avoided taking on full-time staff, and so is able to adjust salaries and fees to the ebb and flow of the work it is commissioned to do.

Methodology

S4. The evaluation of ENN was specified as a performance evaluation, balancing a summative assessment of ENN performance over the past 5 years (2010–2015) with formative conclusions to influence ENN strategy and programme design for the coming period. The evaluation included a review of currently available planning and programming documents and also took account of ENN's earlier history.

S5. Evaluation questions addressed ENN's strategy and performance over the past five years, as well as ENN as an organisation. The main evaluation questions were:

EQ1 What was the quality of ENN's strategy for 2010–2015?

EQ2 How effective was ENN's strategy? What results has ENN achieved?

EQ3 How efficient has ENN been in achieving results? Are its results value for money?

EQ4 What external and internal factors account for ENN's results (or lack of results)?

EQ5 How sustainable is ENN?

EQ6 What are the key lessons that should inform ENN's future strategy?

S6. The evaluation was limited in resources and duration, and drew as much as possible on secondary materials. These included user surveys for FEX, NEX and en-net, as well as a citation survey, which were all undertaken by ENN in 2015, as well as ENN corporate documents. The team drew on wider material from the nutrition sector, and supplemented the secondary material with systematic interviews; interviewees included ENN principals, staff and associates, ENN clients and other collaborators, and observers of the nutrition sector. The evaluation team adopted a participatory approach and, as a part of this evaluation, facilitated a self-assessment by ENN of its organisational effectiveness.

Quality of ENN's Strategy

S7. ENN's first formal strategy was prepared for the period 2010–2015. Following a mid-term review, a revised strategy document was adopted for the period 2013–2015. The strategies have served as guidance rather than a rigid work plan.

S8. The basic messages of the two strategy documents are very similar but the revised strategy focuses more on ENN's activities than on the outcomes and impacts they are intended to achieve. It also crystallises a significant broadening of ENN's focus, beyond emergencies, to include situations where there is an ongoing high burden of undernutrition. ENN's Strategic Objectives (SOs) are formulated as follows:

Strategic Objective 1

To support the identification, dissemination and application of positive developments in nutrition related practice in different contexts through publication, networks and forums.

Strategic Objective 2

To identify, instigate, implement, publish and disseminate high quality operations research and technical and systems reviews on emerging topics, to help strengthen the evidence base for policy making, resource allocation and programming.

Strategic Objective 3

To facilitate inter-agency cooperation, discussion and agreement on key technical areas.

Strategic Objective 4

To continue to engage in global leadership and stewardship related meetings, fora and reviews.

S9. The strategies have enabled ENN to step back from the detail of routine work and consider ENN's overall strategic direction and have also been useful in explaining ENN to other stakeholders. Both versions of the strategy are clearly in line with ENN's underlying purpose and principles.

S10. The evaluation suggests various ways in which future strategies could be strengthened. It would be beneficial to show a strategic orientation towards the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable more explicitly and also to spell out the gender orientations and principles of ENN's work. Neither strategy includes a

funding strategy or sets any financial targets. Budget projections are an important dimension of internal planning and there would be value in publicising ENN's financial planning principles. Further, neither strategy details a theory of change to explain how (and under what assumptions) ENN activities will help lead to desired improvements. Finally, although the revised strategy highlights a commitment to monitoring and evaluation, and both documents include many specific targets, no overall results framework is offered.

ENN's performance 2010-2015

Financial performance

S11. There are wide fluctuations in ENN's annual income – averaging about £0.8m but ranging from a high of £1.12m in 2011/12 to a low of £0.5m in 2013/14. ENN is also heavily dependent on a few donors: more than half of all income over the period was from one donor (OFDA), while the top 3 donors accounted for 84%, and the top 6 donors for 96% of ENN's income. There are similar annual fluctuations in ENN's total expenditure, which are largely personnel costs. Patterns of expenditure and time allocation reflect the structure of ENN's work, where the regular publications (corresponding to SO1) are a fairly stable platform for the rest of ENN's work, and occupy a substantial proportion of staff time. The volume of other work (SOs 2–4) fluctuates much more, with corresponding fluctuations in engagement of associate consultants.

Performance against SO1 – FEX, NEX and en-net

S12. Field Exchange (FEX) continues to be central to ENN's work. ENN's targets for FEX during the evaluation period were to expand distribution, targeting print distribution to readers with poor online access, while also expanding online content and making it easier to search and share. These objectives have been broadly met. User surveys in 2012 and 2015 found high levels of satisfaction, and interviews and documentary evidence also show that FEX continues to be held in high regard. FEX is particularly appreciated as a bridge between fieldwork and peer-reviewed academic publications. There are good reasons to believe FEX has wider effects in terms of influence on thinking and practice, including that interviewees who teach emergency nutrition all reported using ENN materials as teaching resources and that FEX has served as a forum for influential debates, and has helped to disseminate what has become accepted as good practice.

S13. Nutrition Exchange (NEX) was launched as an annual publication in 2011, with French and Arabic as well as English editions; it aims to be more accessible than FEX to national staff. Again, user responses are very positive. Readers believe it has an effect not only on their personal performance but also on the organisations they work for. ENN helps contributors to both FEX and NEX to develop initial ideas into publishable articles. This capacity-development aspect is especially important for NEX which aims to increase contributions from country-level staff.

S14. En-net was initiated in 2009, but most of its development has been during the evaluation period. It is focused on the same community as NEX and FEX, but has the distinctive aim of providing real time advice to practitioners in the field, drawing on both experts and fellow field workers. The evaluation's assessment is strongly positive. The service has been easy to access and well moderated, striking a good balance between peer exchange of experiences and expert advice consistent with appropriate normative guidance. High usage rates are an indication of the value attached to the service. It has also proved nimble and adaptable (as illustrated by its role in helping to develop nutrition guidelines for persons affected by Ebola).

Performance against SO2–SO4

S15. The boundaries between SO2–SO4 are fluid; all are linked to gaps and issues arising out of work under SO1 (as well as reflecting the focal interests and expertise of ENN's technical directors). ENN has shown impressive consistency in following through some key topics over long periods. For example:

- Infant feeding in emergencies (IFE) has been a continuing theme for ENN. This has involved convening technical groups of subject experts and seeking to develop consensus on research priorities and on emerging good practice.
- ENN has also made a substantial contribution to the development of community management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) as an accepted approach. FEX was a vehicle for early discussions of CMAM approaches; ENN's initial stance was to seek adequate evidence before advocating widespread adoption of CMAM. Having contributed to the aggregation of such evidence, ENN brokered a seminal conference on CMAM; this took place in Addis Ababa and was distinctive in putting governments at the centre of the discussion; the conference was preceded by the collaborative assembly of country-level evidence, and proved remarkably effective in spreading acceptance of CMAM as a credible approach.

S16. ENN has also demonstrated willingness and ability to open up new issues and to make important connections where thinking has tended to be too siloed or insufficiently attentive to evidence. ENN's questioning of assumptions/evidence around supplementary feeding programmes was a valuable contribution that preceded this evaluation period but which continues to resonate; more recently work on wasting and stunting and the nutritional effects of cash programmes, shows a similar ability to pursue important technical issues that may cut across traditional boundaries.

S17. External interviewees' assessments of ENN's work were predominantly very positive. Most interviewees saw ENN as living up to its aspirations of facilitating experience-sharing and promoting evidence-based improvements in the practice of emergency nutrition. Interviewees highlighted the contribution of ENN to making available high quality evidence-based reviews and research on key and emerging

questions on nutrition in emergencies, and also their ability to bring field practice to a wider audience of practitioners.

S18. There were also some criticisms: some interviewees felt that ENN has not yet gone far enough in ensuring that southern voices are reflected in the discourse it facilitates; some observers felt that ENN's advocacy for improved international nutrition architecture should be handled more sensitively in order to avoid antagonising key players and perhaps jeopardising ENN's ability to play an honest broker role on technical issues; several strong admirers of ENN are concerned that expanding its remit beyond emergency nutrition carries a risk of diluting the quality of what they see as its continuing core role.

S19. The evaluation's overall assessment is that ENN's body of work in the past five years has been very impressive – both relevant and effective. ENN's work draws on and reinforces the network relationships that began around FEX; in the process ENN (and/or its TDs) have developed strong reputations for the quality of their work, and ability to operate as honest brokers and facilitators; the fact that ENN is not an operational agency (and not unduly beholden to any particular agency) makes such a role easier.

ENN's Value for Money

S20. Assessing "value for money" requires as much attention to the value side of the equation as to analysing costs. Precise measurement of ENN benefits is not practical, as ENN's influence is diffuse and long-term, but the evaluation has found that ENN's work is highly relevant to the improvement of emergency nutrition and that ENN frequently has made a significant difference. The evaluation's value for money analysis therefore focused more narrowly on whether ENN is appropriately set up to manage funds well and minimise the costs of what it does (without sacrificing quality).

S21. ENN's business model allows it to expand services with the use of external consultants and associates without increasing significantly its overheads. A review of salaries in 2009 indicated that the organisation was competitive within the NGO sector (since when there have only been inflation-linked adjustments), and a regular internal review of consultant rates and comparisons with partners and other NGOs in the field allows ENN to control consultant costs. ENN also leverages pro bono inputs from the nutrition community: thus most articles for FEX and NEX are produced free of charge by contributors and there are substantial pro bono inputs also into en-net. ENN has in place the basic financial, budgeting and risk management systems that would be expected for an NGO of its size and has strengthened its accounting and financial systems during the evaluation period.

S22. ENN does not charge individual users for its core knowledge products, as these are public goods, and charging would especially reduce uptake amongst national practitioners. For FEX, the average cost over the 5 year period when calculated per hard copy produced is £11.27 and £6.45 when calculated per hard and

soft copy distributed. For NEX, average unit costs over the five-year period are £9.62 calculated per hard copy distributed, and £6.43 for hard and soft copies. Both FEX and NEX have achieved significant economies of scale over their lifetime as distribution has climbed. Annual costs for running en-net averaged £21,148 for the period to 2014/15, which is very modest considering the forum's high profile and effectiveness. The most obvious way to increase ENN's value for money is to (continue to) increase the uptake of its products.

Key influences on ENN performance

S23. ENN's longevity is an indication of adaptability to the continual changes in the international institutional framework for nutrition and advances in the understanding of malnutrition and its treatment, as well as the significant changes in the aid climate. ENN has used its contacts in the field to stay current with nutrition issues and institutional developments. An important part of ENN's adaptation since 2010 has been a broadening of its focus beyond humanitarian contexts.

S24. ENN has adopted an approach that has become more strategic rather than reactive. In parallel there has been an evolution in the organisation's governance and management towards a more formal and professional approach and its administration has been strengthened. ENN's governance arrangements have worked well, with non-executive trustees bringing valuable auxiliary perspectives and providing useful advice and oversight. However, there was no rotation of trustees during the evaluation period, and formal provisions for the involvement of wider stakeholders in ENN's governance have not been activated. M&E has suffered from the fragmented nature of ENN's formal reporting requirements to donors but ENN recognises that further development of M&E is required.

Sustainability

S25. ENN has already demonstrated durability over nearly two decades, and, at the time of the evaluation, prospects for its future work programme were encouraging. ENN's track record and its business model demonstrate both strengths and potential weaknesses from the perspective of future sustainability. A light and informal administrative model becomes less appropriate as ENN's activities become more complex and funders' accountability requirements become more onerous. ENN remains highly dependent on its individual TDs, and on their personal relationships with each other and with ENN's partners and funders. ENN should consider ways of reducing the potential vulnerability that this dependence implies.

S26. Despite efforts to strengthen fund-raising, ENN is increasingly dependent on a small number of donors. This makes ENN more vulnerable to the withdrawal of any one major funder.

Lessons and Recommendations

Assessment

S27. ENN's original idea of providing a forum for sharing field experiences and linking this to related advocacy and learning has proved to have enduring value. During the evaluation period, ENN's core products have been extended to include Nutrition Exchange and en-net, which have consolidated ENN's ability to support nutritionists in the field and promote experience-sharing and the dissemination of evidence-based good practice. ENN has strengthened its professional core from two to four technical directors and has broadened its focus beyond an exclusive concern with emergency contexts. Nevertheless there has been strong continuity in its purpose and modus operandi. ENN's effectiveness depends on the quality of its flagship products and its other work, on the relationships and contacts built up over many years, and on its reputation for neutrality and integrity. Its "social capital" needs careful maintenance.

Recommendations

S28. ENN's first priority should be to maintain and strengthen what it already does well. Field Exchange, en-net and Nutrition Exchange are valuable in themselves but also the essential platform for all of ENN's work. As well as maintaining their quality, there is scope to expand the network of users, with particular attention to reaching more non-international and non-anglophone users.

S29. The 2016–2020 strategy should be strengthened by: including an explicit theory of change, showing how ENN intends to influence nutrition policy and practice and how ENN's various products and activities aim to complement each other in achieving such influence; linking the theory of change to an overall M&E framework which includes appropriate indicators of influence in addition to activity and output indicators; underpinning the strategy with explicit budget and staffing scenarios (including recruitment and staff development plans); including plans for strengthening ENN governance and management; and explicitly stating ENN's gender and equity commitments.

S30. ENN should recruit an operations manager to head its administration, supervise ENN's other administrative staff, and take a major role in fundraising, relationship management and M&E.

S31. ENN can also seek to be as strategic in fundraising as possible by actively seeking to regain recurrent (unrestricted) funding; seeking (more) longer term strategic funding, seeking to tap development as well as emergency funding sources; seeking coordinated strategic relationships with major donors; and seeking to use its own overall M&E framework as the common basis for reporting to, and dialogue with, donors.

S32. ENN should aim in the medium term to adapt and strengthen its governance so as to make it more durable and less dependent on the present set of individuals. An early priority should be to seek new trustees so that the principle of rotation can be put into practice. ENN should also consider ways of activating provisions in the existing company regulations that would allow more stakeholders to be involved in ENN's governance